In this context, the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, has invited the Minister of Petroleum of Pakistan to hold further discussions on the issue, and to also explore cooperation possibilities for the export of diesel from India to Pakistan.

Invitation to President Bush

745. SHRI YASHWANT SINHA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Prime Minister has invited United States President Bush to visit India; and

(b) the response of President Bush to this invitation?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) Yes, during their meeting in September 21, 2004 in New York, Prime Minister extended an invitation to U.S. President Bush to visit India.

(b) President Bush's response was positive.

Increase in freight rates for tankers

746. SHRI MURLI DEORA: Will the Minister of SHIPPING, ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the increase in crude prices since September, 2004 has culminated in a jump in shipping rates;

(b) if so, the freight rates for various categories of tankers in early September and at present;

(c) whether charter rates for very large crude carriers per day have almost doubled and if so, the reasons therefor; and

(d) whether import of crude is also increasing and if so, the arrangement made for providing more tankers and efforts made to reduce the freight rates?

THE MINISTER OF SHIPPING, ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS (SHRI T.R. BAALU): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir. Freight rates for various categories of tankers in September, 04 and at present (December, 04) are as under:—

	SEPTEMBER, 04	DECEMBER, 04
Very Large Crude Carrier (about 275,000 M tons)		
From West Africa:	US$10-11.00 per ton	US$ 30-31.00 per ton
From Arabian Gulf:	US$4.50-5.00 per ton	US$ 14.50-15.00 ; per ton
SUEZ MAX (Arabian Gulf) (about 135,000 M tons)	US$ 6.50-7.00 per to	US$ 16.00-16.50 per ton
AFRAMAX (Arabian Gulf) (about 90,000 M tons)	US$7.50-8.00 per ton	US$14.50-15.00 per ton

(c) Yes, Sir. Main reasons for increase in charter rates are seasonal increase in demand during winter in Europe, USA and also increased demand from China.

(d) There is an increase in import of crude oil. In order to increase the number of Indian Tankers, Government has taken various fiscal measures which include introduction of tonnage tax, 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment in Shipping Sector, enhancement of depreciation rate from 20 per cent to 25 per cent for ships etc. However, freight rates depend on demand and supply of tankers available in the required position.

Establishment of passport office in Shimla

†747. SHRI KRIPAL PARMAR: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the names of States where passport offices have not been established till date;

(b) whether it is a fact that a decision to establish a passport office in

†Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.